The agony of Jack Ruby

JACK RUBY. By Garry Wills and Ovid Demaris. New American Library. 266 pp. $5.95.

By Jon R. Waltz

In the mid-20th century, according to the authors of this book, three strangers came to Dallas, Texas, and did reprehensible things. They were Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby and Melvin M. Belli. Of the three, Wills and Demaris consider Ruby the most sympathetic.

The authors, working from interviews with a Runyonesque collection of those who knew Jack Ruby best, paint a poignant, even tragicomic word-picture of Oswald's killer. It is a rococo portrait; their writing style—slick, pseudo-tough journalese—is born of Manchester out of *Time* magazine. But there are worse styles and here it serves the purpose. The fact is that non-lawyers Wills and Demaris have done a far, far better job of explaining why Jack Ruby did not deserve to be killed by the State than attorney Melvin Belli of San Francisco ever did. They have made the moving summation that Ruby's jurors never heard.

Jack Ruby is about a paradoxical man, at once pathetic and strong; erratic and purposeful; kind and cruel. He ran cheap nightclubs and wanted "class." A prim man who moralized with his fists, Ruby hated "punks" and "characters" and beat them up. But, according to one of his entertainers, "he'd help anyone who came along and needed food or a place to stay." Furthermore, he was a ready, if often unwanted, protector of women. He was incessantly on the prowl for the "big deal that would make him a big man," but he veered away from projects just as they began to show promise. He ran after people with power and toadied to them, fawning, pressing favors into their closed hands, squirming into their slice of the limelight. Still, it was said, "the one thing Ruby does not want is to be a clown." The man wanted dignity and a measure of respect. He thought he would not always be the operator of seedy strip-joints.

Jack Ruby said "The big deal is somewhere out there if only one gets in its way." He was wrong; it came about in reverse. Although, as Wills and Demaris rather melodramatically put it, "history had broken her dates with Jack Ruby before," on November 24, 1963, the big deal got in Ruby's way. He followed his curiosity into the Dallas City Hall basement. There he encountered a smirking "punk," a "character" who had hurt the wife of the President of the United States and whose continued existence would surely bring more pain to her. Ruby—protector of women, seeker of fame—got rid of the "punk" while 80 millions watched, and so became history's most public assassin.

His act was observable but the reasons for it were not. I doubt that anyone will come much closer than Wills and Demaris to fathoming Ruby's motivation for murdering Lee Harvey Oswald. (The only other writer to try at all was defense counsel Belli, but his book *Dallas Justice* was mainly a strident apologia for his puzzling trial tactics and was soon, and mercifully, remaindered.) The answer to the vexing Ruby question is infinitely more complex than the one given by a Dallas bail bondsman: "Well, everyone was saying the sonovabitch needs killing, and Jack was anxious to please." It is clear that Ruby himself could not fully comprehend why he had done what he did; as his Warren Commission testimony reveals, he viewed his own conduct in a glass very darkly. And yet the authors, although hampered occasionally by a dearth of hard facts, have accomplished an impressively plausible reconstruction of the ingredients of Jack Ruby's final explosion.

If this book did nothing more than plumb Ruby's strange personality it would be open to the charge that it tells more about Ruby than anyone cares, or needs, to know. Ruby the man, after all, was unimportant, just as most of the members of his drama—Judge Joe B. Brown, Henry Menasco Wade, Belli—are unimportant. But Ruby's act was important; it set important things in motion. The authors discuss these matters, too.

Ruby's crime set in motion this country's machinery of justice. It did not serve him well. Wills and Demaris stumble now and then in describing Ruby's farcical trial (a minor criticism; only lawyers will know for sure), but one thing they demonstrate beyond question. During the course of a disastrous defense Ruby was turned into the very thing he never wanted to be, a shrunken, fractured clown. The authors, who carry

Jon R. Waltz, co-author of The Trial of Jack Ruby, *teaches at Northwestern University Law School.*

Jack Ruby, manacled, on way to sanity hearing

rapiers, more than suggest that this transformation was itself consummated by a cast of buffoons.

Ruby's crime, inextricably bound up with Oswald's, also set in motion an investigative process of unprecedented dimensions. In turn, a band of conspiratorialists emerged to weave phantasmagorical theories that included a protesting Ruby. Jack Ruby became, in their lucrative conjectures, the designated silencer of a co-conspirator.

The authors, in a perceptive fact-analysis, shred the hypotheses of those who would make an avocation of John Kennedy's assassination and its grotesque aftermath. They draw back the corpse of Jack Ruby from the hands of the Mark Lanes and the Harold Weisbergs and lay it to rest again. It is a not inconsiderable service. (Nothing, of course, can be done about Mrs. Marguerite Oswald's contention that Ruby is still alive and plotting further killings.)

Admirable as they are, however, Wills and Demaris fail in one vital respect. They do not explain how one essentially unimportant man, Jack Ruby—caught up in the movement of history—could be so ill used by almost everyone and everything that touched him before he disappeared. If it be fairly said that this one large failure was inevitable, then it must be in the same breath be said that American justice is more imperfect than most of us have thought.